

REV. WILLIAM H. MILBURN

Patten, J. A.

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*Lines of the Clergy of New
York and Brooklyn. By
J. A. Patten. New York, 1874.*
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**REV. WILLIAM H. MILBURN,
LATE PASTOR OF THE JOHN ST. METHODIST
CHURCH, NEW YORK.**

REV. WILLIAM H. MILBURN was born in Philadelphia, September 26th, 1823. When five years of age he was struck in the eye with a piece of iron hoop, being at play with some boys throwing at a mark. His eye recovered, but a protuberance existed which affected the downward vision. Caustic was applied, which became so severe that the boy resisted, and in his struggle with the physician, both eyes were dashed with it. As a remedy for this new misfortune, they were kept bathed with a solution of sugar of lead for two years, but the pupils became so much injured that very imperfect sight remained only in the left corner of the right eye.

In May, 1838, his father removed to Jacksonville, Illinois. The almost blind but persevering youth now became a clerk in his father's store, and at the same time pursued studies which he had already undertaken. He could manage to see by having a projected shade over the eye, and then placing the hand convexly shaped beneath it, and leaning the body forward at an angle of forty-five degrees. One letter was as much as he could distinguish at a time. Says another: "At his place by the door in summer, and at a window in winter, sitting in a constrained posture, he received the sunlight of knowledge, as it were, through a crevice in the roof instead of by the effulgence poured in through surrounding windows, and besides the disability of sight, suffering from the incessant interruptions consequent upon strict attention to the store, and the constant ear-vigilance necessary to distinguish customers from idlers."

He entered the freshman class of Illinois College, situated at Jacksonville, in 1839, still continuing his clerkship. In the spring of 1843, his last collegiate year, his health declined, and study was interdicted. His ailments were a slight curvature of the spine and some internal organic complaints.

From an early period he had looked to the ministry as his future profession. As it now became necessary for him to ride on horseback, the Methodist presiding elder of the district in which he lived urged that he should accompany him in traveling his circuit and assist in preaching. The following is an interesting account of the manner in which this plan was carried out :

“ His father furnished him with a horse, saddle, and saddle-bags ; his mother fitted him with a grayish-blue jean suit (a homespun woolen fabric, the coarse quality of which goes under the name of linsey-woolsey), and, thus accoutred, with over-coat strapped on the saddle, he starts forth, in company with the presiding elder, as an itinerant preacher, to make the first acquaintance with his circuit. He had never rode before to any amount, but at the end of two and a half days an appointment one hundred miles distant was punctually attained. His theological course had also commenced, with the good elder as the professional corps, the Bible his text-book, the saddle his meditation seat, and God’s wide, beautiful earth the seminary. The appointment was a quarterly meeting, held in a double log-cabin—that is, a cabin with two rooms, on the floors of which the preachers slept at night. The meeting began at one o’clock on Sunday afternoon, with a sermon by the elder. In the evening the local preacher officiated, at the close of which service the elder, without warning, spoke out in an imperious voice—‘ Brother Milburn, exhort!’ and thus, standing behind a splint-bottomed chair, ‘ Brother Milburn ’ made his first address to a religious assembly, and his profession was entered at the age of nineteen.”

During this summer he traveled a region of one thousand miles, preaching constantly. In September, on his twentieth birthday, he was admitted as a “ traveling preacher ” to the Illinois Conference. Two years later he was directed by the Conference to proceed to the East and solicit funds for the establishment of Methodist schools and colleges in the West. Being on board a steamboat on the Ohio river, when Sunday came he was invited to preach. He had been excessively pained during the trip at the blasphemy, drunkenness, and gambling which prevailed among the passengers, and especially in the case of certain congressmen, then on their way to Washington. When he took his place to begin the services, he found that these persons had been provided with front seats, and resolved to administer a public rebuke to them. Accordingly, in the course of his remarks, he said : “ Among the passengers in this steamer are a

number of members of Congress, and, from their position, they should be examples of good morals and dignified conduct; but, from what I have heard of them, they are not so. The union of these States, if dependent on such guardians, would be unsafe, and all the high hopes I have of the future of my country would be dashed to the ground. These gentlemen, for days past, have made the air heavy with profane conversation, have been constant patrons of the bar and encouragers of intemperance—nay, more; the night, which should have been devoted to rest, has been dedicated to the horrid vices of gaming, profanity, and drunkenness. And," continued the preacher, with great solemnity, "there is but one chance of salvation for the great sinners in high places, and that is, to humbly repent of their sins, call on the Saviour for forgiveness, and reform their lives."

Mr. Milburn shortly returned to his state-room, where a purse of money was brought to him in the name of the congressmen, with the request that he would accept it as a testimonial of their respect for his character and appreciation of his sermon. The congressmen were not disposed to let the matter end even here, for they proposed Mr. Milburn for chaplain of Congress, to which position he was elected.

In 1847 Mr. Milburn went to the South, and for six years labored in Montgomery, Mobile, and elsewhere. To show the extent of his exertion, it may be mentioned that during five years of this period he preached fifteen hundred times and traveled sixty thousand miles.

He was re-elected chaplain of Congress, and held the office until March, 1855. He delivered a course of lectures before the Lowell Institute, Boston, entitled "Sketches of the Early History and Settlement of the Mississippi Valley." Other lectures bear the titles—"Songs in the Night, or the Triumph of Genius over Blindness;" "An Hour's Talk About Women;" "The Southern Man;" "The Rifle, Axe, and Saddle-bags," "Symbols of Early Western Character and Civilization." These lectures were delivered in all the principal places in the Union. In 1859 he visited England, in company with Bishop Simpson and Rev. Dr. McClintock, and delivered lectures in the chief cities to crowded audiences. During the same year he published "Ten Years of a Preacher's Life," and in the following year "Pioneers and the People of the Mississippi Valley."

At one time Mr. Milburn was the pastor of the Pacific street Methodist Church, Brooklyn; his last appointment was at the John

street Church, New York. He subsequently became an Episcopalian. He was ordained deacon in 1865, and priest in 1866 by Bishop Hopkins of Vermont. In 1871 he returned to the Methodist communion.

Most of his time is spent in traveling in this country or Europe. His more recent lectures are "What a Blind Man Saw in Paris," and "What a Blind Man Saw in California."

Mr. Milburn has never entirely recovered from his spinal complaint, and is obliged to remain in a horizontal position during a portion of each day. His sight is now so nearly destroyed, that he is unable to read at all, and just dimly distinguishes the outline of objects in a favorable light and position. He recognizes acquaintances by the voice, and judges of character by the intonation as others do from expression. He moves about in familiar places without difficulty, and often travels unattended, trusting to the kindness of strangers. His memory is very remarkable. While at college a student came to his room with a volume of "Chalmer's Astronomical Discourses," and read a half or two-thirds of one of them, in which young Milburn became greatly interested, and requested to have it read again. After this was done he said—"Thank you! I have it now."

"What do you mean—have what?" asked the student.

"Why, I have that sermon," was the reply of Milburn, who at once repeated the part he had heard *verbatim*.

After his marriage, in 1846, his wife became his principal reader. At some periods she read to him ten hours a day for weeks together, four or five hours at a sitting, and sometimes fifteen hours out of the twenty-four. When in Brooklyn, the ladies of the congregation performed this service for him, very much to his pleasure and their own profit. Says another: "His habit at present, when wishing to commit a new chapter preparatory to public worship, is to have it read to him on the previous day, and he repeats it after the reader verse by verse, and then in sets of four verses, commencing each time at the beginning of the chapter. With one reading of the chapter thereafter he is prepared to go through it before an audience without a possibility of failure. Poetry he commits with greater facility than prose. He is perfectly familiar with the hymn-book, and can probably repeat most of the New Testament, and considerable portions of the Old. His retention of names, dates, facts, and conversations, seems to be equally good, the only difference of power being between the committing of prose and poetry.

Mr. Milburn's success in overcoming the difficulties presented to him, as a student, and minister, by his blindness, is among the marvels. He stands a living and noble example of the fruits of that patience which is unwearying, and that desire for learning which cannot be defeated in its aim. The eager spirit which neither acknowledges control nor can bear delay must entirely fail in any conception of the task by which this sightless enthusiastic executed his heroic resolution. At noonday the tired student may look upon the face of nature, beaming with its manifold beauties; or, as his midnight lamp grows dim, he may turn his gaze to the firmament studded with its starry worlds; but, through these long and patient hours—through these weeks and months, lengthening into years—this student-preacher found that even the little ray with which he lit up the pages, letter by letter, was fading into eternal gloom. Still he persevered, as within his mind there was rising a light of knowledge, which burned as a sun to his feet, and was more delightful than could be the fragrance of all flowers to his nostrils. Great has been his courage and lofty his ambition in such a struggle with misfortune; but he has gained treasures to make beautiful his days on earth, and which enable him, with clearness of mental vision, to be a guide to those, like himself, hopeful of the celestial land beyond.

Mr. Milburn is of a slight figure, and has a thoughtful and interesting face. His sightlessness throws a melancholy shadow over his features, but so amiable and intelligent is the expression, that the gaze willingly lingers in their contemplation.

In the pulpit he has an eloquence beyond his words. To think that he is blind, and still able to conduct an entire church service, is to fill the mind with thoughts approaching veneration. Presently his soft, sweet voice recites a hymn and then a chapter from the Bible. You miss the books, but there is a new fascination in the sacred words spoken from the memory of the eloquent blind man. His sermon is equally impressive. It has all the characteristics of an extempore address, and is, in truth, delivered but slightly from memory. He is not boisterous and declamatory, like most of the Methodist ministers, but proceeds calmly, tenderly, and always eloquently. His effort is to be entirely natural, and to touch the heart rather than amaze the mind. At times he shows great depth of feeling with his subject, and becomes more animated in his delivery.

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